

MERCURY

BY D. H. LAWRENCE

It was Sunday, and very hot. The holiday makers flocked to the hill of Mercury, to rise two thousand feet above the steamy haze of the valleys. For the summer had been very wet, and the sudden heat covered the land in hot steam.

Every time it made its ascent, the funicular was crowded. It hauled itself up the steep incline, which toward the top looked almost perpendicular, the steel thread of the rails in the gulf of pine trees hanging like an iron rope against a wall. The women held their breath, and did n't look. Or they looked back toward the sinking levels of the river, steamed and dim, far-stretching over the frontier.

When you arrived at the top, there was nothing to do. The hill was a pine-covered cone, paths wound between the high tree trunks, and you could walk round and see the glimpses of the world all round, all round: the dim far river plain, with a dull glint of the great stream, to westward; southward the black, forest-covered, agile-looking hills, with emerald-green clearings and a white house or two; last the inner valley, with two villages, factory chimneys, pointed churches, and hills beyond; and north the steep hills of forest, with reddish crags and reddish castle ruins. The hot sun burned overhead, and all was in steam.

Only on the very summit of the hill there was a tower, an outlook tower; a long restaurant with its beer garden, all the little yellow tables standing their round discs under the horse-

chestnut trees; then a bit of a rock garden on the slope. But the great trees began again in wilderness a few yards off.

The Sunday crowd came up in waves from the funicular. In waves they ebbed through the beer garden. But not many sat down to drink. Nobody was spending any money. Some paid to go up the outlook tower, to look down on a world of vapors and black, agile-crouching hills and half-cooked towns. Then everybody dispersed along the paths, to sit among the trees in the cool air.

There was not a breath of wind. As you lay and looked upward at the shaggy, barbaric middle world of the pine trees, it was difficult to decide whether the pure, high trunks supported the upper thicket of darkness, or whether they descended from it like great cords stretched downward. Anyhow, in between the tree-top world and the earth world went the wonderful clean cords of innumerable proud tree trunks, clear as rain. And as you watched you saw that the upper world was faintly moving, faintly, most faintly swaying, with a circular movement, though the lower trunks were utterly motionless and monolithic.

There was nothing to do. In all the world there was nothing to do, and nothing to be done. Why have we all come to the top of the Merkur? There is nothing for us to do.

What matter! We have come a stride beyond the world. Let it steam

and cook its half-baked reality below there. On the hill of Mercury we take no notice. Even we do not trouble to wander and pick the fat blue sourish bilberries. Just lie and see the rain-pure tree trunks like chords of music between two worlds.

The hours pass by, people wander and disappear and reappear. All is hot and quiet. Humanity is rarely boisterous any more. You go for a drink; finches run among the few people at the tables; everybody glances at everybody, but with remoteness.

There is nothing to do but to return and lie down under the pine trees. Nothing to do. But why do anything, anyhow? The desire to do anything has gone. The tree trunks, living like rain, they are quite active enough.

At the foot of the outlook tower there is an old tablet stone with a very much battered Mercury in relief. There is also an altar, or votive stone, both from the Roman times. The Romans are supposed to have worshipped Mercury on this summit. The battered god, with his round sun head, looks very hollow-eyed and unimpressive in the purplish red sandstone of the district. And no one any more will throw grains of offering in the hollow of the votive stone: also common, purplish-red sandstone, very local and un-Roman.

The Sunday people do not even look. Why should they? They keep passing on into the pine trees. And many sit on the benches, many lie upon the long chairs. It is very hot in the afternoon, and very still.

Till there seems a faint whistling in the tops of the pine trees, and out of the universal semiconsciousness of the afternoon arouses a bristling uneasiness. The crowd is astir, looking at the sky. And sure enough, there is a great flat blackness reared up in the

western sky, curled with white wisps and loose breast feathers. It looks very sinister, as only the elements still can look. Under the sudden weird whistling of the upper pine trees there is a subdued babble and calling of frightened voices.

They want to get down, the crowd wants to get down off the hill of Mercury before the storm comes. At any price to get off this hill! They stream toward the funicular, while the sky blackens with incredible rapidity. And as the crowd presses down toward the little station the first blaze of lightning opens out, followed immediately by a crash of thunder, and great darkness. In one strange movement the crowd takes refuge in the deep verandah of the restaurant, pressing among the little tables in silence. There is no rain, and no definite wind, only a sudden coldness which makes the crowd press closer.

They press closer, in the darkness and the suspense. They have become curiously unified, the crowd, as if they had fused into one body. As the air sends a chill waft under the verandah, the voices murmur plaintively, like birds under leaves, the bodies press closer together, seeking shelter in contact.

The gloom, dark as night, seems to continue a long time. Then suddenly the lightning dances white on the floor, dances and shakes upon the ground, up and down, and lights up the white striding of a man, lights him up only to the hips, white and naked and striding, with fire on his heels. He seems to be hurrying, this fiery man whose upper half is invisible, and at his naked heels white little flames seem to flutter. His flat, powerful thighs, his legs white as fire, stride rapidly across the open, in front of the verandah, dragging little white flames at the ankles, with the

movement. He is going somewhere, swiftly.

In the great bang of the thunder the apparition disappears, the earth moves, and the house jumps in complete darkness. A faint whimpering of terror comes from the crowd, as the cold air swirls in. But still, upon the darkness, there is no rain. There is no relief: a long wait.

Brilliant and blinding, the lightning falls again; a strange bruising thud comes from the forest, as all the little tables and the secret tree trunks stand for one unnatural second exposed. Then the blow of the thunder, under which the house and the crowd reel as under an explosion. The storm is playing directly upon the Merkur. A belated sound of tearing branches comes out of the forest.

And again the white splash of the lightning on the ground; but nothing moves. And again the long, rattling, instantaneous volleying of the thunder, in the darkness. The crowd is panting with fear, as the lightning again strikes white, and something again seems to burst, in the forest, as the thunder crashes.

At last, into the motionlessness of the storm, in rushes the wind, with the fiery flying of bits of ice, and the sudden sea-like roaring of the pine trees. The crowd winces and draws back, as the bits of ice hit in the face like fire. The roar of the trees is so great, it becomes like another silence. And through it are heard the crashing and splintering of timber, as the hurricane concentrates upon the hill.

Down comes the hail, in a roar that covers every other sound, thrashing ponderously upon the ground and the roofs and the trees. And as the crowd surges irresistibly into the interior of the building, from the crushing of this ice fall, still amid the sombre hoarseness

sound the tinkle and crackle of things breaking.

After an eternity of dread, it ends suddenly. Outside is a faint gleam of yellow light, over the snow and the endless débris of twigs and things broken. It is very cold, with the atmosphere of ice and deep winter. The forest looks wan, above the white earth, where the ice balls lie in their myriads, six inches deep, littered with all the twigs and things they have broken.

'Yes! Yes!' say the men, taking sudden courage as the yellow light comes into the air. 'Now we can go!'

The first brave ones emerge, picking up the big hailstones, pointing to the overthrown tables. Some, however, do not linger. They hurry to the funicular station, to see if the apparatus is still working.

The funicular station is on the north side of the hill. The men come back, saying there is no one there. The crowd begins to emerge upon the wet, crunching whiteness of the hail, spreading around in curiosity, waiting for the men who operate the funicular.

On the south side of the outlook tower two bodies lay in the cold but thawing hail. The dark blue of the uniform showed blackish. Both men were dead. But the lightning had completely removed the clothing from the legs of one man, so that he was naked from the hips down. There he lay, his face sideways on the snow, and two drops of blood running from his nose into his big, blonde, military moustache. He lay there near the votive stone of the Mercury. His companion, a young man, lay face downward, a few yards behind him.

The sun began to emerge. The crowd gaped in dread, afraid to touch the bodies of the men. Why had they, the dead funicular men, come

round to this side of the hill, anyhow?

The funicular would not work. Something had happened to it in the storm. The crowd began to wind down the bare hill, on the slippery ice. Everywhere the earth bristled with broken pine boughs and twigs. But the bushes and the leafy trees were stripped absolutely bare, to a miracle. The lower

earth was leafless and naked as in winter.

'Absolute winter!' murmured the crowd, as they hurried, frightened, down the steep, winding descent, extricating themselves from the fallen pine branches.

Meanwhile the sun began to steam in great heat.

DOOMSDAY

A SAGA OF TO-DAY

BY CARL CHRISTIAN JENSEN

I

WHEN my legs dangled on a rough church bench in my childhood, and the preacher implored the Holy Ghost to 'fill' his flock, things beyond nature were revealed to me. For something unearthly crawled into my legs and hung on like frost, with a thousand tiny fingers, growing dead heavy. This something never did fill all of my body, — I always feared that it might, — only my legs. And when I limped out of church it sank to my toes like sediment and simmered out peacefully.

After that time I grew aware of other wonders. A dozen times I eluded sudden death. I lived my days of adolescence brimmed with bliss. I found a mate, sound as her native soil. And I learned that chance had won me more than my ancestral share of wealth: brawn, blessed by the great goodness of nature; brains enough to catch a truth or two on the wing; and the greatest of all, because a universe

in miniature, blood that could 'feel' beauty. My feelings floated in my veins. Yet in the narrow sense I gave neither God nor Devil any credit. My anchor was held by many million chains.

Once I had failed to find God — at eighteen, during a raging spring fever. 'Too large an order! God is the universe,' a friend whispered. 'Too small an order! There is no God,' roared another. 'Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, he shall not enter therein!' a third quoted. 'A child's a functional fool,' snarled a fourth. 'The purest of poetry!' murmured my blood.

As I grew older I came to love the church, save when hymns were sung like jazz, or when the house of God was built of spruce, or when the man of holy orders was very young and raw with tonsillitis. I even joined a church; though I never grew so intimate as did my friends with God and

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